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ABSTRACT

To determine students' thought processes as they are writing, over 100 secondary school English students periodically were asked a set of questions immediately after an in-class writing activity, when they were most in touch with their own experiences. Questions were: (1) What things happen to you when you write? (2) What things concerning writing would you like to know more about? (3) How would you describe your own writing process? and (4) How has your writing changed so far this year? The student responses fell into three general categories: the anxious reaction, euphoria, and the normal reaction. Most students fell into the normal category, experiencing frustrations when ideas rushed into their minds before they could organize them. As time passed, students began to assume the identity of "writer" rather than "student trying to write," an indication that they were developing a sense of self-awareness and a new sense of identity. They also began to make some astute assessments of their own skills and progress as writers. This informal survey revealed the kinds of joys and frustrations students experience to which teachers often lack access, showed how students grow from their frustrations, and indicated how writing development can lead to self-directed writing. (SKC)

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SELF AWARENESS CAN LEAD TO GREATER CONTROL FOR YOUNG WRITERS

by
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The following article was developed from a one-year study of students' thought processes which occur during writing. The study sought to discover how students assume responsibility for their writing development.)

During the last few years as I have watched my students writing, I have often wondered what learning and growth processes were occuring within them. How, I would think, does all of this mental and emotional activity ultimately affect their writing development.

Since I am a believer in teacher research (I have spent two years working in George Mason University's Teacher-Researcher Seminar), I decided to turn my idle wonderings into the research question "What goes on inside students' minds during writing?" and see what kind of answers my students could give me.

I asked my students to try to become aware of what happened to them while they wrote. Periodically, thoughout the school year, I would ask them the following set of questions, always immediately after an in-class writing acitivity when they were most in touch with their own experiences:

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1. What things happen to you when you write?
2. What things concerning writing would you like to know more about?
3. How would you describe your own writing process?
4. How has your writing changed so far this year?

STUDENTS' REACTIONS TO WRITING

There were over one hundred students in my English classes. Their abilities ranged from excellent to very poor with most being in the middle range. As I sorted through their responses, I noticed three kinds of reactions to writing: anxiety, euphoria, and normal responses.

The Anxious Reaction

My most anxious students seemed also to be my most paralyzed students. Abby was one of these paralyzed students. She found writing to be a chore at best. She rarely turned in a completed assignment. Her responses to my questions changed very little over time.

Early in the school year, she wrote, "I get very bored and sleepy." As time went by, she said, "My mind goes blank and I have no idea what to write." At the end of the year, she was still repeating the idea that her writing was "stupid," "terrible," and "boring." She was caught in the clutches of her anxiety and she remained discouraged. She was not able to conceptualize herself as a writer.

The Euphoric Reaction

There were a few students who seemed to be on the opposite end of the scale from Abby. Bill was one of those articulate, spontaneous and enthusiastic writers who was never at a loss for words or ideas. Writing was immensely

easy for him and he loved to do it. When he described his own writing process, he made such comments as "When I start, my brain sends words into my hand and I write," and "I am constantly thinking when I write." Writing for Bill was always a pleasure.

The Normal Reaction

Most of my students were neither Bills not Abbies. Most of them fell into the large grey area in the middle. They alternately progressed and regressed. Sometimes they expressed a sense of mastery and comfort in writing; sometimes, they expressed frustration and confusion. Early in the year, they wrote the following kinds of comments:

> When I write, I've noticed that a lot of different ideas run through my mind and it causes me to get confused.
>
> When I write, my mind goes faster than my pencil and I get mixed up. My writing is jumbled, not complete--I have great ideas but they're too rushed.

Many of these "normal" writers as I call them, described the experience of trying to write while their minds rushed ahead. Often they would loose an idea because they could not write it down fast enough. Or they would experience a rush of ideas, ideas that would suddenly go in a direction they had never expected. They might discover themselves in the middle of a new thought they did not understand, and did not know how to handle. Or this wonderful flow of thought and energy might cease just as suddenly as it had started.

I noticed that this common experience of confusion and disorientation occurred at the point at which ideas were

emerging into their conscious minds but not yet taking shape. A few students expressed their frustration verbally by saying that they no longer wanted or liked to write. A few others acted out their frustration by procrastinating and finding reasons not to write at all. Many, however, noticed their discomfort but continued to put forth effort.

It occured to me that perhaps this sense of confusion and disorientation might be the writer's first internal signal that growth was occuring. Perhaps because growth can be like an experience into the unknown, the writer had several choices. The writer could either block it out and "clutch up" as Abby did, or he or she could learn to cope and move through this discomfort.

THE EMERGING OF SELF-AWARENESS AND A NEW SENSE OF IDENTITY

As the year passed by, these young people began to assume the identity of "writer" rather than "student trying to write."

Sam is a good example a young writer developing a sense of self-awareness. In the early months of school, he wrote "My mind starts up when I start writing. If I have an idea, I usually write it down so I won't forget."

In later months, he wrote, "My mind starts to think about things that I never really thought about, like things I used to do and feelings I used to feel."

I was intrigued. Sam seemed to have moved from a concern about memory to making new connections as he wrote, and more important, he was aware that this process was

happening. He went on to say, "(My writing process is still) a little poor but I'm working on it, and it seems to be getting better...I've learned to be more creative with my writing and to enjoy it more than I used to."

HOW STUDENTS COPE WITH THEIR OWN WRITING GROWTH

As the year progressed, I noticed that my students were beginning to make some astute assessments about themselves. They seemed to be asking themselves, "What can I do well, what can I not do well, and what kind of a writer would I like to become?" As a natural progression, without my specifically asking them to do so, they went about setting goals for themselves and devising plans for reaching these goals.

Vanessa

Early in the school year, Vanessa said that she wanted to focus on organization and structure. She said, "I'd like to know more about the organization of a paper--what to write where, etc," and "My writing, I'd say, is very plain."

By January, she felt satisfied with her organizational skills and wanted to strive for subtlty and artistic sensitivity. She said,

> I can say my organizational skills have developed more. I have more organization and I feel more comfortable. But what I write about isn't always in depth. I always say what I want flat out. I don't symbolize anything. Now I want to know more about symbolism and how to use is in my writing.

Vanessa was in process of self diagnosis and goal setting.

Kristen

Kristen is a good expamle of a student who managed to

devise a method for achieving a goal she had chosen. In October, she talked about having a personal sense of gratification through her diary writing but she felt limited in other forms of writing.

> When I write in my diary it helps me get all my thoughts and feelings sorted out. I like to write about things happening around me at the present time. My writing is not very broad yet.

In January, Kristen said,

> When I write, it's sometimes still hard to know what to say, so I pretend like I'm talking to someone, like I'm telling them a story. Then I write down what I've said.

She found that she could use the imaginary conversation as a framework for making decisions about what to write.

Loraine

Loraine found herself seeking to make her writing clear to her readers. She said:

> When I write my ideas are too far into make believe and imagination. I wish my writing would become more serious and realistic so other people could understand it better.

Later in the year, when asked how her writing had changed during the year, she said,

> I pretend that my pen is connected to someone else's eyes. I try to please their senses as much as possible, without being vague or nonimaginative."

She was clearly gaining a sense of audience awareness.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

So what had I learned from watching my students in light of my research question?

1. Well, for one thing, my students had told me in their own words about experiences which we teachers

usually only know about through our intuitions. I had experienced with them their frustrations and joys, and I had watched them take steps toward becoming mature writers.

2. They showed me that the way ~~that the way~~ in which students choose to respond to the frustrations and growth experiences of writing had a lot to do with the kind of progress they made as developing writers. Those who gave up did not progress and those who kept trying did progress and grow.
3. They let me know that something we were doing was encouraging them to increase their selfawareness, and selfawareness in turn was encouraging them to take control of their own writing development and growth. Selfawareness, and assuming the identity of "writer," was leading them to become self-directed. They were relying less on me to tell them what and how to write, and more on their own instincts to guide them.

It seemed to me, on reflection, that during this year in which I was engaged in teacher research, my students were more alive, more involved in the struggle to grow as writers. What had been the secret ingredient that added more energy and sparkle to our classes?

The one thing that had been obviously different was the existence of the research project itself. Never before had I so intensely and consistently asked my students to look at themselves and report on what they noticed.

Psychotherapists have know for a long time that bringing unconscious processes and thoughts into the conscious mind encourages personality integration and opens the doors of self development and growth. I have to think that this same principle was at work in our classroom.

The questions I had asked my students all year were geared to introspection and reflection on the self. In asking them to consider such things as what concerns they had

about writing and what things happened as they wrote, and in asking them to describe their own unique writing processes and how they changed as time went on, these questions themselves gave focus to the students' thinking and channeled their awareness onto themselves as writers.

It would seem that making time for students to reflect on their own development and giving them a form in which to do it helps them to assume responsibility for their own growth. It would also seem that teachers' creating more time to observe and reflect on their students' learning processes and behavior encourages student (and teacher) growth.